1A: The Watersheds Upstream

Questions & Answers

Q: Ted Labbe, is the progress of this project from north to south or some other organizational scheme?

Labbe: There are six biologists presently working on this project, and we each have our own region. We are each at various stages of completion with some of the basic building of the database, and I'd have to say, if you are interested in a particular area, finding out about whether it's been completed, I would have to refer you to that particular person. Generally we do work from north to south in each of our areas and from east to west. That's very general. We each have our own strategies.

Q: Is the web site up for the project?

Labbe: There is a web site up. It has yet to contain any data, access to any data. It's more for informational purposes for people about our web site. It's available through the Northwest Indian Fisheries commission web site, which, I believe, is www.mako.nwifc.org. You can search for the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission and there will be a link to our project.

Q: Chris May, you were saying there was no threshold effect of impacts on water quality and hydrology as the impervious area even got up the 5 percent of the area. I wonder if you could comment on any responses from municipal planners when it comes to occupying land in drainage basins. They must get pretty depressed about this.   Basically, what you're saying is that there is no level of development that they can argue does not have an impact on water quality.

May: To qualify that: there is no level of development at the current way we develop our watersheds. I alluded to the fact that I think one of the big answers to this problem may be to take a look at how we develop our watersheds, and incorporate some of the known common sense and otherwise new facts, if you will, to develop differently. And possibly, if that happens, maybe there is some threshold. I would just say that there is probably some panic about this.

Q: Is someone looking at possible ideas such as that we may have to stop development in certain sub basins to ensure the conservation of some of these habitats as we occupy the lowland?

May: In the late 1980's and early 1990's when some of these results were first being intimated, King County was in the process of developing zoning plans for the Bear Creek and Soos Creek basins, and one of the responses was, in fact, to down-zone certain areas that were judged to be of high habitat quality. It certainly didn't end development. But it substantially reduced the development expectations of a number of the property owners in that area.

Jacques White: I work for People for Puget Sound, and I am in a position to try to advocate to policy makers about particular decisions and moving in particular directions about restoring salmon and other resources in the Puget Sound basin. The talk that was given earlier today by Jeffrey Stern was very interesting because he had a cost-benefit analysis of protecting existing salmon resources depleted and otherwise. But when I hear talk about restoration, I feel like it's very difficult to make decisions on a cost-benefit basis. I haven't seen good analysis of doing a particular action in a particular type of area and, given the talk that was given by Dr. May earlier, it seems like there is very little reason to try to restore already degraded urban areas. So I was wondering, do any of the speakers know of a cost-benefit analysis for restoration as opposed to just protection actions.

A: Tim Beachy has done some work on restoration, I think it was in the Skagit, on restoration of agriculturally dominated watershed and the benefits of doing, let's say, side channel restoration vs. culvert replacement vs. riparian protection.

Comment: I'd like to suggest that cost-benefit isn't the only way to approach this. You probably realize that. Some more practical ways are just, for example, identifying funds of money that are there and how to increase them. Most counties, for example, have a conservation futures assessment on property right now that's not a significant assessment, but it does create a fair amount of money. I know the city of Tacoma raises about $400 dollars a year in its conservation assessment, which is about a quarter of what's raised in Pierce County. Maybe a starting point is to say, well, what if we multiplied that by four— what would that effect be? And just start thinking in absolute terms rather than cost-benefit.

Comment: I should mention that Jeff Stern wasn't able to stay because he is at the county council right now arguing for improved drainage standards on new development to protect fish habitat.

Q: Should buffers be increased from standard forest practice requirements if the land is to be converted to urban uses.

A: Yes. I think the buffer issue has to be revisited a bit. I don't think we know what is an adequate riparian buffer for an urban area. Just to define buffers for "urban" areas is kind of simplifying it because I think it would depend on your land use within that area. Most buffers standards now are based on either agricultural or forest practices, and we need to look at specifically what we need to do with those buffers in conjunction with stormwater best management practices and the whole suite of other watershed methods to prevent degradation or rehabilitate a stream. Currently we map out our buffers and developers are typically pretty good about keeping to those buffers. But after the development becomes a neighborhood, there's no delineation there. There's no active education given to the homeowners. And typically we find that encroachment from homeowners is fairly prevalent. Buffers that start as 100 feet can go down to almost nothing in five years. To some extent it's like comparing apples and oranges: forest practices and urbanization. Because a clear cut grows back eventually, or it's planted. Northgate Mall does not grow back. And there are always people in urban areas, working, doing things in the buffer area. In contrast, that's not true in most forest areas. I mean, they come in and then they're out. It's a totally different issue, and I think to base one on the other is to ignore a problem.